

Hilliard History Lives: Battle of the Little Bighorn has Hilliard connection

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Guest columnist



It was late morning on June 25, 1876. The 7th Cavalry Regiment under the command of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer was about to break camp and continue to pursue Sitting Bull and his warriors.

Custer's scouts had just reported that they had spotted the Native American camp, but they had also been spotted.

Custer wanted to strike fast. He divided his regiment into three battalions, and they moved out. While traveling along the banks of the Little Bighorn River, suddenly, from the woods and from behind the hills, Sitting Bull's warriors surged towards Custer's troops.

One could just imagine Sgt. Miles O'Hara in his robust voice barking out the command for the men in his company to "dismount and form a skirmish line."

Just picture the men lying prone in the tall grass with their guns at the ready, watching the Native American warriors charging towards them, realizing they were outnumbered 40 to one. The battle was on.

O'Hara also dismounted and strode behind his troops shouting words of encouragement in the face of overwhelming odds.

A shot rang out. O'Hara buckled and thus became the first casualty of the pending "Custer's Last Stand." The battle lasted a little over an hour, and the Sioux, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribesmen easily won their most decisive victory over the U.S. military.

A total of 268 U.S. soldiers died. The only survivor among the cohort under Custer's immediate command was Comanche, a horse, that had been wounded several different times.

As the smoke cleared, the gruesome scene was that of the victorious Native Americans beginning their ritual of scalping and, in some cases, desecrating the fallen soldiers.

This is when another significant event occurred: The warriors recognized the body of Weston Harrington. To show their respect for a soldier who had previously committed an act they considered honorable to their cause, they draped a buffalo blanket over his body, which meant his body was not to be desecrated. In fact, Harrington's body was the only soldier whose body was not desecrated.

This brings us to why we are highlighting these two special soldiers: O'Hara and Harrington, the first soldier killed, and the only soldier not desecrated.

There is a small village in Prairie Township on Broad Street, just west of Columbus and a little south of Hilliard, called Alton. Two families with the surnames of Harrington and O'Hara resided in that small community.

Miles O'Hara was born in Alton in September 1851. He enlisted in the military in Columbus on Oct. 30, 1872, at the age of 21.

Weston Harrington was born in Alton in February 1855. It was illegal to enlist at the age of 17, so he lied about his age when he enlisted Nov. 4, 1872, in Columbus, just four days after O'Hara. It is purely speculation, but one would think that the two young men, if not friends, were at least acquaintances. Both men were assigned to the 7th Cavalry, setting the stage for this unique intertwining of historical events.

Descendants of both families eventually enrolled in the Hilliard school system. Interestingly, Harrington's descendant, Emma Harrington, was in Hilliard High School's first graduating class, which numbered two students, in 1888.

O'Hara's descendant Willian "Bill" O'Hara became a principal in Hilliard City Schools and had family members attend and/or graduate from Hilliard. Bill O'Hara also was known in Hilliard for constructing the community's first public swimming pool on Latimer Street.

The connection among Custer, the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the descendants of O'Hara and Harrington going through the Hilliard school system almost is complete.



The final phase of this gathering of unique historical facts is the creation of a memorial garden in the Hilliard Historical Village in Weaver Park. We already have the original Harrington grave marker from the Alton Cemetery in Galloway placed in the garden, and we are working on getting a tombstone from the O'Hara family to place alongside the Harrington monument.

Related story: [Grave marker keeps Little Bighorn soldier's memory alive in Hilliard](#)

We also plan to place a historical plaque highlighting this special display.

Please come to the Historical Village, 4100 Columbia St., to see this attraction and all the other historical buildings and museum and see the continuing saga of how Hilliard history lives.

Tim Woodruff is president of the [Hilliard Ohio Historical Society](#). The historical society's Hilliard History Lives guest column is a periodic feature in the ThisWeek Hilliard News.